

Why Jaydon Can't Read: A Forum on Fixing Literacy

Jennifer Buckingham, Justine Ferrari, and Tom Alegounarias

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This collection of edited speeches is from a CIS policy forum held on 14 November 2013 to discuss the article 'Why Jaydon Can't Read: The Triumph of Ideology over Evidence in Teaching Reading' published in the Spring 2013 issue of *Policy*.

Jennifer Buckingham, Research Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies and co-author of 'Why Jaydon Can't Read':

- Billions of dollars of public money have been spent trying to improve literacy levels of school students over the last decade in Australia, and yet hundreds of thousands of students are barely literate.
- Almost all children can learn to read with effective, evidence-based reading instruction. Unfortunately, many teachers still use unproven methods based on whole-language philosophy or ad hoc 'balanced literacy' programs.
- Pre-service teacher education has not prepared teachers in effective reading instruction strategies, and government policy has not promoted the use of evidence-based teaching methods.

Justine Ferrari, National Education Correspondent, *The Australian*

- The reading or literacy wars have been waging inside the teaching profession for the best part of three decades.
- Rather than examine the reasons thousands of teenagers can go through school barely able to read, defenders of the existing system continue arguing about what is reading. Or they focus on the children who can read—the 90% plus. If doctors were losing 10% or 20% of their patients each year, they would re-examine their practice, rethink their treatment plans, and change the medicine.
- In Australia, any observer would recognise that there's a defensive, evangelistic zeal among many literacy educators and an ideological blindness that makes them cling to their beliefs in the face of the evidence of what is NOT working and what is.

Jennifer Buckingham is a Research Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies; **Justine Ferrari** is National Education Correspondent at *The Australian*; **Tom Alegounarias** is President of the NSW Board of Studies.

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Tom Alegounarias, President of the NSW Board of Studies

- The 'research to practice' gap in reading instruction is due to a lack of engagement with evidence and data in the teaching profession and a lack of confidence in dealing with empirical research. Moreover, ideologies, belief systems, and entrenched practices often overwhelm evidence of what works for particular students in particular circumstances.
- This disconnection between research and teaching practice is not a result of a recalcitrant, self-serving, wilful and ideological teaching workforce. Rather, it is a lack of professional, policy and academic leadership. Too often, bureaucrats have found a safe place at the side of the reading wars and watched with detached curiosity.
- The days of generic constructivist homilies masquerading as teaching techniques for reading are over. With regard to reading, the teaching profession needs to evolve to place the responsibility of direct instruction and its contingent relationship to learning at its heart.

The key to improving literacy is effective instruction

Jennifer Buckingham

Last year, I was at a pharmacy with my daughter, who was having her ears pierced. While we were waiting, a man brought his daughter into the pharmacy to have her ears pierced, too. The man and I were each given a form to fill out. He stood there for a long time looking at it. Eventually, before I realised what was going on, one of the sales assistants recognised the problem and discretely took him aside and read the form to him. He couldn't read it. Can you imagine what that must be like? That distressing incident was just one occasion on one day for that man.

Survey after survey has shown that a large number of Australian children and adults—hundreds of thousands, in fact—are either illiterate, or able to read at only the most rudimentary level—after as many as nine or ten years of school.

Governments know that this problem exists. Billions of dollars of public money have been spent trying to improve literacy levels of school students over the last decade in Australia. Millions more are likely spent privately by families on reading programs, tutoring and specialist services.

It is nearly impossible to calculate exact spending figures using data in the public domain, but the figures below give some idea of the money involved. Obviously, these data are not complete so they underestimate the real total. For NSW, the amount is for literacy and numeracy but it's reasonable to assume that at least half the total, and most likely more, is literacy spending. Of course, this is just the targeted literacy and numeracy spending. It doesn't include the many billions of dollars that go into schools for the general provision of education that should include teaching children to read.

- **National Partnerships (Literacy and Numeracy) 2008–09 to 2011–12:** \$500 million from the federal government and \$500 million from state governments.
- **National Partnerships (Low Socio-economic Status) 2008–09 to 2011–12:** \$1.5 billion, some of which was also used for literacy programs.¹
- **NSW Government Targeted Literacy and Numeracy Spending 2002–03 to 2007–08:** \$800 million.²
- **Victorian Government Literacy Program Funding 2003–08:** \$650 million.³

What did we get for all this extra spending?

Table 1 shows the proportions and estimated numbers of children who were in the lowest two bands of achievement in the NAPLAN tests in 2013. We can assume there are similar numbers of students in the intervening year levels.

Table 1. Students at/below minimum standard for reading, NAPLAN 2013

	Percentage of cohort	Estimated number
Year 3	$(4.7 / 8.7) = 13.4$	37,000
Year 5	$(3.8 / 9.9) = 13.7$	35,000
Year 7	$(5.8 / 12.7) = 18.5$	51,000
Year 9	$(6.6 / 16.6) = 23.3$	64,000

Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy: National Report for 2013* (Sydney: ACARA, 2013).

These proportions have changed only marginally since the NAPLAN tests began in 2008. The state Basic Skills Tests, which took place in the decade or so before NAPLAN replaced them, also indicated that little progress had been made in improving literacy levels.

Billions of dollars of public money have been spent trying to improve literacy levels of school students over the last decade in Australia.

Data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) are even more damning (Table 2). They suggest that one in four Australian students in Year 4 is achieving only the low international benchmark at best.

Table 2. Students at/below the 'low' international benchmark, PIRLS 2011

	Percentage of Year 4 cohort	Mean rank out of 45 countries
Northern Ireland	13	5
Canada	14	12
United States	14	6
Ireland	15	10
England	17	11
Australia	24	27
New Zealand	25	23

Source: Sue Thomson, et al. *Monitoring Australian Year 4 Student Achievement Internationally: TIMSS and PIRLS 2011* (Melbourne: ACER, 2012).

Whether the proportion of the population these figures represent has shifted marginally up or down in the last 10 years does not change the fact that many thousands of children are not achieving a sufficient level of literacy to allow them to be successful in their education. Whether Australia's ranking is 6th or 10th in the world makes no difference to the many people who can barely function in our information-soaked society, let alone enjoy the latest Man Booker Prize-winning novel. Calling this a crisis suggests something sudden and temporary. Boris Johnson is more accurate when he calls it a 'slow motion disaster.'⁴

Why, after at least \$100,000 worth of schooling and thousands of hours of instruction, do so many children fail to learn to read? A small number have cognitive or congenital disabilities that make learning very difficult. How do we explain the rest?

There are two plausible explanations. One is that there is something wrong with the children—they are too stupid or too poor or too naughty. The other explanation is there is something wrong with the way the children are being taught.

It is much easier for educators to posit the first explanation. It lets them off the hook. Fortunately, however, it is wrong. Almost all children can learn to read, given the right sort of instruction. Also, fortunately, scientific research has shown what kind of instructional strategies are most effective and for the greatest number of children.

Sixty years ago, Rudolph Flesch made the bestseller list with his book *Why Johnny Can't Read*. He explained in plain language why the methods of teaching reading at the time were not working.

The teaching of reading—all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks—is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense. Johnny couldn't read until half a year ago for the simple reason that nobody ever showed him how.

Reading means getting meaning from certain combinations of letters. Teach the child what each letter stands for and he can read.⁵

Schools had adopted an approach to reading based on an educational theory that students learn naturally and construct their own knowledge from experience. Children would learn to read words if exposed to them often enough. In reading lessons, this took the form of 'basal readers' that were constructed of a few words repeated many times. This method is called 'Look Say' or 'Whole Word'—children had to remember each and every word individually, a bit like a pictograph.

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Flesch explained that this method overloads the memory unnecessarily and does not give students the ability to use the alphabetic principles and rules of written language to work out new words.

Whole language, which is the method that dominates classrooms today, is a somewhat different beast to whole word. It abandons the restricted vocabulary of the basal readers and whole word teaching, instead theorising that if children are read to and shown ‘high quality literature,’ their word range will expand. In this theory, learning to read is just like learning to speak. Children will learn to read just by reading.

The Comprehension Hypothesis claims that we learn to read by reading
... The Comprehension Hypothesis is a central part of whole language.

— Stephen Krashen, 2000⁶

Whole language is a nice theory, but it is just a theory. Hundreds of scientific studies and dozens of thorough literature reviews, stretching back to Jeanne Chall’s *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1967), have shown that learning to read is a much more complex process than just environmental exposure.

Effective, evidence-based reading instruction has five elements, all of which are necessary and none of which is sufficient alone. They are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. It is difficult to say it any more clearly—phonics is one of five essential elements. Nowhere has it ever been claimed by serious reading scientists that phonics alone is sufficient.

In implementing systematic phonics instruction, educators must keep the end in mind and ensure that children understand the purpose of learning letter sounds and that they are able to apply these skills accurately and fluently in their daily reading and writing activities.

— National Reading Panel, 2000⁷

The [National Inquiry into Teaching Literacy] committee recommends that teachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency. Equally, that teachers provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies.

— National Inquiry into Teaching Literacy, 2005⁸

High quality, systematic phonic work as defined by the [Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading] should be taught discretely ... Phonic work should be set within a broad and rich language curriculum that takes full account of developing the four interdependent strands of language: speaking, listening, reading and writing and enlarging children’s stock of words.

— Jim Rose, 2006⁹

Yet it is quite possible to teach phonics badly and for it to have little effect. That is what happens in ‘balanced’ literacy programs. Balanced literacy sounds like it is the best of all worlds, but in reality it is either simply whole language in disguise or a mishmash of approaches. Phonics instruction helps beginning and struggling readers most when it is taught explicitly (that is, not incidentally in book reading), in a particular sequence, and is purposefully integrated into text reading.

Effective, evidence-based reading instruction has five elements, all of which are necessary and none of which is sufficient alone.

Surveys of teacher educators and senior school staff have found a low level of confidence in the personal literacy skills of beginning teachers.

Almost every school in Australia will say it teaches phonics, but a large proportion of schools are not teaching it well. Some are doing too much, some not enough. This is why phonics often becomes the bone of contention in the ‘reading wars.’

What is often lacking in initial reading instruction, in particular, is effective, specific instruction in what is known as synthetic phonics; how to relate letters to sounds and to blend letter sounds into words ... Phonics instruction provides a self-teaching mechanism by which children can teach themselves an increasing number of new words, initially by sounding them out. With sufficient repetition, and this varies for each child, these words are learned as sight words; they do not subsequently have to be sounded out each time they are encountered in text.

— Kevin Wheldall, 2006¹⁰

This brings us to 2013 and ‘Why Jaydon Can’t Read.’¹¹ The name has changed, but the problem is the same—Jaydon can’t read because he has not been taught to read using strategies proven to be the most effective.

There are main two culprits—pre-service teacher education and government policy.

The first part of the problem in pre-service teacher education is what has been called the ‘Peter effect.’ In the Bible, when a beggar asked the apostle Peter for money, he responded that he could not give what he did not himself have. In the context of reading instruction, the Peter effect is that one cannot teach what one does not know.

The data in Table 3 are from one of a number of studies of literacy and language knowledge of pre-service teachers, that is, people who are undertaking teaching degrees. It is typical of the findings of studies in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom showing that a large proportion of pre-service teachers and in-service teachers had insufficient knowledge of meta-linguistics—basic language constructs such as phonological awareness and morphology—to be able to use it in their teaching. Surveys of teacher educators and senior school staff in a national sample of university education faculties and schools found a low level of confidence in the personal literacy skills of beginning teachers. This is partly due to low entrance requirements for many teaching degrees. Yet this skill deficit is not being addressed before graduation.

Table 3. Pre-service teachers’ knowledge of basic language constructs

Question	Percentage of pre-service teachers who gave correct response
Q: What is a phoneme?	73%
Q. How many phonemes are there in these words?	
Chop	33%
Box	7%
This	28%
Q. What is phonics?	96%

Source: Ruth Fielding-Barnsley, ‘Australian Pre-Service Teachers’ Knowledge of Phonemic Awareness and Phonics in the Process of Learning to Read,’ *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties* 15:1 (2010), 99–110.

It’s not as if pre-service and beginning teachers are oblivious to the gaps in their knowledge. The survey data presented in tables 4 and 5 are again indicative of what is found more widely.

Table 4. Beginning primary school teachers' perceptions of their teacher education courses: Development of conceptual understanding of aspects of literacy

Aspect of literacy	Percentage of beginning teachers who said their course had adequately developed their conceptual understanding
Reading	75%
Writing	75%
Speaking and listening	70%
Viewing	57%
Grammar	53%
Phonics	52%
Spelling	51%

Source: William Loudon and Mary Rohl, "Too Many Theories and Not Enough Instruction": Perceptions of Preservice Teacher Preparation for Literacy Teaching in Australian Schools, *Literacy* 40:2 (2006), 66–78.

Table 5. Beginning primary school teachers' perceptions of their teacher education courses: Preparation to teach aspects of literacy

Aspect of literacy	Percentage of beginning teachers who said their course had adequately developed them to teach
Reading	64%
Writing	64%
Speaking & Listening	58%
Viewing	46%
Grammar	43%
Phonics	43%
Spelling	42%

Source: William Loudon and Mary Rohl, "Too Many Theories and Not Enough Instruction": Perceptions of Preservice Teacher preparation for Literacy Teaching in Australian Schools, *Literacy* 40:2 (2006).

These data indicate that pre-service and beginning teachers are not confident about their own knowledge and abilities to teach reading. They are aware that they have not been adequately prepared.

An audit for the National Inquiry into Teaching Literacy (NITL) found that in almost all 34 four-year primary education teaching degree courses, less than 10% of content in compulsory subjects was preparation to teach reading. In half the degree courses, it was less than 5%. The range among all 34 institutions was as low as 1% and peaked at 15%.¹² It's strange that the ability to teach reading is not considered a higher priority for primary school teachers.

Furthermore, the audit did not scrutinise the content of the courses, leaving open the question of whether even this small amount of time was spent wisely. This quote from 2008 from the inquiry chairman, Ken Rowe, in his usual take-no-prisoners style, leaves little doubt about his response to the content of the courses and why so little had changed since the inquiry.

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Teacher education is one source of the problem. The other is government policy.

Higher education providers of education and those who provide ongoing professional development of teachers, with a few exceptions, are still puddling around in postmodernist claptrap about how children learn to read.

— Ken Rowe, 2008¹³

Education faculties seem to have a deep antipathy to the scientific method, instead preferring to use case studies, and even poetry, to analyse and evaluate educational issues. Tom and Justine will say more about this.

Professor Keith Stanovich, a pre-eminent and influential reading scientist from Canada, talks about the impact of the ‘authority syndrome’ on education, which ascribes knowledge to an expert individual, and contrasts it to a scientific approach, which is democratic and open to change.

Nothing has retarded the cumulative growth of knowledge in the psychology of reading more than failure to deal with problems in a scientific manner.

Education’s well-known susceptibility to the ‘authority syndrome’ stems from its tacit endorsement of a personalistic view of knowledge acquisition: the belief that knowledge resides within particular individuals who then dispenses it to others ... An adherence to a subjective, personalized view of knowledge is what continually leads to educational fads that could easily be avoided by grounding teachers and other practitioners in the importance of scientific thinking for solving educational problems.

— Keith Stanovich, 1993¹⁴

Teacher education is one source of the problem. The other is government policy. Policy development on reading and literacy in all governments too is consistently undermined by the vagaries of the political cycle, a reliance on non-expert ‘experts,’ and misallocation of vital resources into ineffective programs, partly because of persistent failure to evaluate programs properly.

Australian governments are not unique in this regard. For example, some aspects of the reforms to New York City’s education system under Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools chief Joel Klein are well known, particularly school report cards and expansion of charter schools. These reforms have been divisive and the lack of improvement in New York schools is sometimes held as evidence of the failure of these reforms.

What is not known is that reading instruction was also reformed in NYC under Klein and Bloomberg. Klein and Bloomberg claimed that only programs proven to work would be used in New York’s public schools and that reading instruction would focus on phonics daily. To that end, a program called Month-by-Month Phonics was approved for schools. Yet, as is so often the case, this was a balanced literacy program that hijacked the language of effective, evidence-based reading instruction.

Not only has [Month-by-Month Phonics] never met the ‘proven to work’ standard set by the mayor; it isn’t even a systematic phonics program, despite its name.

In a letter to Bloomberg, Klein, and Lam, seven noted reading specialists, including three who had served on the National Reading

Panel, said that Month-by-Month Phonics is ‘woefully inadequate,’ ‘lacks a research base,’ and ‘puts beginning readers at risk of failure in learning to read.’

— Sol Stern, 2005¹⁵

Such subterfuge is happening in Australian schools, too. Untested programs are being implemented in schools, often with children most at risk of reading failure. The result is large numbers of children who require remedial reading intervention, with only a small number receiving it. Often the intervention itself does not meet the criteria of effective, evidence-based reading instruction.

Everyone considers themselves an expert on teaching reading. They are not. Initial and remedial reading instruction in particular is highly specific and scientific. Using proven, effective teaching methods is the only way to relieve children of the burden of illiteracy, and it’s one of the few things schools are not doing.

Observations on the ‘reading wars’

Justine Ferrari

I’m not a teacher, never have been, and I cover education rather than work in it, so I’m an independent observer. But I am also a true insider—as a parent and as an avid reader.

Reading has always been an important part of my life. I’ve been trying to remember when I didn’t read, but can’t. I don’t remember learning to read, nor did I struggle with it. I do remember my father telling me about my younger sister learning to read, and how she seemed to pick it up so quickly, until he realised that because he was reading her the same books he’d read to me, she knew them by heart. She could tell the story, even recite it word-perfect, but she wasn’t reading it. He had to buy her a whole new set of books.

My sister did go on to learn to read but I was thinking of my father’s story because it illustrates how there are children who appear to read but can’t, just as there are teachers who appear to teach reading but don’t, and academics who appear to train teachers in teaching reading, but don’t. And that’s the problem.

I didn’t know there was more than one way to teach reading until my son started school, which was before I started covering education for *The Australian*. He couldn’t read before he started school but he knew his letters and could write his name, and I conscientiously read to him every night. So I was perplexed when he started bringing home ‘readers.’ What was he meant to do with them? I asked his teacher: Should I sound out the letters, point to the words as I read to him, get him to repeat them after me? She told me to just read it with him and he’d pick it up. Like by osmosis, or magic?

That was my introduction to the reading wars. But it was not until I started covering education for *The Australian* a few years later that I knew there was a dispute about the teaching of reading. And a dispute about what we mean by reading. So let me share some of my war stories.

I contrast the approach of my son’s teacher—a sort of blind faith in a teaching dogma—with that of a teacher at Peakhurst South Public School, Anna Matekja.

Anna was a Year 1 teacher and sick of seeing at the end of every year a handful of children in her class who couldn’t read. She read the research and introduced in the school, to some resistance, a program that taught the children the

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42 letter-sound combinations that make up the English language and how to blend them into words. The results were immediate and dramatic. After only five months, the kindergarten students were reading at the level of the Year 1 students above them. Every child in the class learned to read.

Anna's experience raises these questions. Is there more than one way to teach reading? Is there a right way to teach reading? Do reading and literacy mean different things? Is reading a different, and subordinate, skill to literacy?

From a parent's—and a journalist's—point of view, the distinction between reading and literacy seems a specious argument: the sort of discussion elbow-patched academics might engage in by the fireside over whisky and pipe-smoking.

The more extreme proponents of the whole language side of the reading or literacy wars often use the term 'reading' in a derogatory fashion to denote an inferior skill to literacy. They use it to refer to the simple decoding of symbols without understanding the word, as if reading the actual letters on the page is somehow separate to gaining literacy. They sometimes use the phrase 'barking at print' to indicate that the activity is divorced from meaning or understanding.

In her book on the literacy wars, Monash University education professor and former teacher Ilana Snyder takes aim at critics of the whole language approach. (*The Australian* gets particular attention for airing the debate).

Professor Snyder declares that literacy is difficult to define, and that there is no single correct view of literacy that is universally accepted. She says that literacy traditionally has been considered a psychological ability, an 'unchanging set of basic skills' used to crack the alphabet code. But today literacy is, in Snyder's words, 'a repertoire of social practices.'

According to this view, learning to be literate is more like learning to play a musical instrument in an orchestra than the mechanical acquisition of decoding and encoding skills in a classroom.

It is interesting, and perhaps ironic, that she should use the analogy of mastering a musical instrument, because that's the one which most often comes to my mind when listening to arguments about reading, particularly that children learn to read naturally like they learn to talk.

No one expects a child to become proficient in playing the piano simply by listening to it, or by having their parents play to them every night.

Sure, some gifted children will teach themselves to play and pick it up by sight, but for the vast majority of us, it requires explicit teaching to match the notes to the keys, which key is which, how to strike them, how to read music, and, of course, practice.

While Snyder and too many of her colleagues debate abstract arguments about whether it's reading or literacy, or 'making meaning' rather than sounding out words, schools push through tens of thousands of children every year without the reading skills they need.

Is it that complicated? As a parent, I know whether my children can read or not. I expect that my child's teacher knows whether my child can read or not, and most importantly, knows what to do about it.

The reading or literacy wars have been waging inside the teaching profession for the best part of three decades. They first came to the public's attention when *The Australian* published an open letter from a group of education researchers to then federal Minister for Education Brendan Nelson, which resulted in the 'Teaching Reading: National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy' led by Ken Rowe.

The 'whole language' approach to reading was part of the rise of progressive education in the 1970s. It was a reaction to traditional teaching methods that taught letter-sound relationships divorced from any words or actual stories. Drill-and-kill is how it's sometimes described. For killing a love of reading.

Many things changed for the better with the intervention of the progressivists. Engaging children in their own learning became more important, as did teaching skills in the context of how they're used. Children's experiences of school and the classroom were energised and they became more active participants in their own learning. The trouble is that from an observer's perspective, too often the context became more important than the skills being taught.

The whole language movement coincided with the rise of post-modernism and the introduction—some would say invasion—of cultural studies into subject English, which led to a further questioning of what constitutes reading.

If 'making meaning' becomes the central and defining feature of subject English, then the content of that subject is no longer language—words and sentences. Instead we now have texts. And what is a text? A text seems to be anything that conveys meaning. But is reading bus tickets or a text message or a billboard as meaningful as reading Shakespeare? As I understand it, the term 'literacy' has come to refer to various forms of 'making meaning' from 'texts,' not books, whether they are composed of words, images, moving pictures, sounds or combinations of all of them.

Of course understanding what you are reading is important. But the academic theorists are yet to explain to parents and the community how anyone can 'make meaning' from a book when they can't read the words on the page.

It should always come back to words.

These methods of reading are pushed by groups of teachers and academics like the Literacy Educators Coalition, which describes itself as a group of 'passionate literacy advocates.' They're headed by some of the biggest proponents of whole language—which with consummate sleight of hand they now call the 'balanced approach'—including the children's author Mem Fox and representatives past and present of the English teachers associations.

On the website, the literacy educators have a section helpfully called 'What We Believe,' which is instructive in understanding their philosophy. Third on the list of 15 beliefs (cutely lettered a–o rather than numbered) is this: 'The only reason for reading is to construct meaning' and in brackets it says: 'Reading does not require the production of sound, but it may.' It means you can read without moving your lips but that doesn't mean the sound is divorced from the meaning. Each of those letters represents a sound, that's the point.

At letter 'f' they declare: 'The teaching of phonics is closely related to the teaching of writing; and the teaching of writing is closely related to the teaching of reading.' That's *phonics*, the symbols that represent the sounds in our spoken language.

Until about March 2012, the website also boasted that more than 90% of students are at or above national minimum standards in literacy. By April, the website was redesigned and this statement disappeared. Maybe the weight of evidence of declining results in national and international literacy tests became too much.

Still it's a statement worth examining, because every time I write a story focusing on the proportion of children falling behind, this figure is quoted *ad nauseam* as 'proof' that there is no problem with our reading skills. According to NAPLAN, the national literacy and numeracy tests, about 25% of Year 9 students are at or below the minimum standards in reading. That's about 70,000 teenagers.

Rather than examine the reasons why these teenagers can go through school barely able to read, defenders of the existing system seem to continue arguing about what is reading. Or they focus on the children who can read—the 90% plus.

This is a bare minimum of standards we're boasting about here, not an aspirational level of skills. Should we be aiming for a minimum standard? And what about the kids below the benchmark? What priority are they?

If doctors were losing 10% or 20% of their patients each year, they would re-examine their practice, rethink their treatment plans, and change the medicine. But activists in this debate point to the 90% they've saved. Is that good enough?

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Doctors may not be able to save every patient, but every child can learn to read. As a researcher in learning difficulties once said to me, there's no such thing as a learning difficulty, there are only teaching difficulties.

So to return to my main question: Is there a right way to teach reading? The evidence says yes, there is. Unfortunately, not enough teachers know it and too few children experience it. I, like many parents, often feel let down by the teaching profession, though I don't mean to single out teachers for blame, and I make a distinction between teachers doing their best and 'literacy educators.' I think teachers have been let down by education faculties in universities, which are dominated by progressivists—teachers should be the custodians of the profession's practice. The best practice, the methods that work developed through years of experience and compiling evidence.

In medicine, doctors follow clear professional protocols in diagnosing patients and prescribing the right treatment, based on the profession's years of experience and research evidence. The practice is fairly standardised across the profession; some doctors might be better diagnosticians but all basically follow the same rule book for the same condition. Even my car mechanic or the dishwasher repairman uses an established and consistent protocol to diagnose and fix a problem. This diagnosis of a problem, and a prescribed action to fix it, is lacking in teaching. But it's not impossible or even difficult to do.

The school where a colleague sends his son called in the parents of the kindergarten kids who were not learning to read as fast as the rest of the class. We need your help, the school said, to make sure your children keep up. They were given some basic drills to do in the car on the way to school for one term. In three months, the boy was reading.

Catholic schools in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, where a lot of disadvantaged families live, including refugees and new migrants, started a trial teaching kids how to speak before they learn how to read. These schools were responding to research that kids in poor families hear millions of fewer words by the time they start school than middle-class children, and you can't read language you can't speak. They now teach children phonics, sentence structure, how to tell a story. It's a controlled trial, and the reading skills of the children taught oral language are rising at twice the rate of the control group.

Teachers often say we should copy Finland, which tops the international tests, rather than America with its national testing. I agree. In Finnish schools, not only do all teachers have masters' degrees, but also the bottom 30% of students in a class are given extra help by their teacher to make sure they don't fall behind.

But in Australia, any observer would recognise that there's a defensive, evangelistic zeal among many literacy educators and an ideological blindness that makes them cling to their beliefs in the face of the evidence of what is NOT working and what is. They go to great lengths to oppose attempts to change the way reading is taught. When Verity Firth, then NSW Education Minister, announced in 2009 a trial of reading programs to figure out which ones work, the whole language advocates tried to organise a campaign to turn her against evidence-based programs like MultiLit before the trial had even begun. Due to the typical problem of poor evaluation processes, the trial did not end up providing useful information anyway.

The fact that some children don't learn to read is the responsibility of the whole teaching profession and the academics who train them. Instead, from my experience, there's a degree of defensiveness about the failure rate that is complacent and unacceptable. Teachers, like doctors, are dealing with kids' lives. Failure in school cuts off potential in a child's life, and that starts with a failure to read.

It was never my intention to become a partisan in a specialist professional debate. I am not trained as a teacher, nor do I have specialist literacy expertise. But I bring to

this subject my training as a journalist, my experience as a parent, and my common sense. Parents and the community expect the profession that is responsible for the education of our children to apply professional judgment, analysis and evidence-based practice to its work each and every day. We expect to be able to see that professional expertise in action consistently. We expect that judgments are made on the basis that particular practices work, and that they haven't been influenced by philosophy or prejudice.

I simply do not believe that this is the case in relation to teaching kids to read. And the fact that the literacy wars continue to exist proves my point.

Policymakers and the research-to-practice gap

Tom Alegounarias

I'm not a literacy expert but a policy analyst. The article 'Why Jaydon Can't Read' argues that there is a gap between teaching practice and evidence of what works in reading instruction, and which has 'prevented the widespread adoption of effective methods for teaching reading.'¹⁶

The reasons for this 'research to practice' gap are generally a lack of engagement with evidence and data in the teaching profession and a lack of confidence in dealing with empirical research. Moreover, ideologies, belief systems and entrenched practices often overwhelm evidence of what works for particular students in particular circumstances.

The implications are substantial for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in particular, but also for our capacity to meet the challenges of an increasingly competitive economic environment.

This disconnection between research and teaching practice is not a result of a recalcitrant, self-serving, wilful and ideological teaching workforce, as is commonly asserted. Rather, it is a lack of professional, policy and academic leadership. The profession and its policy environment have not responded well enough or quickly enough to the demand for universally high-quality education.

So what actions or policy corrections are available to us?

I will make my case drawing on my experience in bureaucracy and policy development, but I want to make two pre-emptive qualifications to what follows. First, I do not absolve myself of responsibility for the collective failure to achieve better rates of reading and literacy. And second, I will not be offering research data to support my assertions. I am aware of the irony in that.

Literacy and reading are universally understood as foundational for an individual's capacity to engage and succeed in education, and subsequently, in life. Our obligation to implement effective literacy practice is therefore nothing short of an obligation to universal enfranchisement. The obligation is not to guarantee each individual's success. Rather, it is to ensure the efficacy of our approaches to teaching literacy to improve equality of opportunity in education.

At an absolute minimum is an obligation to ensure our practices in education do not damage or neglect students' interests. At a slightly higher but contingent level, there is an obligation to ensure that policy and practice are informed by evidence. And then, consistent with our expectations, there is the common requirement that programs and approaches are evaluated rigorously and regularly.

A case can be made that policies have not consistently met any of these standards for literacy teaching. So the question must be asked: Does this reflect a disregard among policymakers for the interests of the least advantaged?

The reasons for this 'research to practice' gap are generally a lack of engagement with evidence and data in the teaching profession and a lack of confidence in dealing with empirical research.

Some 25 years ago, it was not uncommon to hear bureaucrats say things like, 'the best way to encourage reading is to put a child in a room with books.'

This question is not just a moral one; there is also an economic competitiveness imperative. In the 1970s, around 30% of students applied to go to a university in NSW. In the TV series, *Keating: The Interviews*, Paul Keating says he thinks maybe one or two people from his final school year went on to university. That figure is now closer to 85%. And that is partly because jobs that don't require a relatively high level of education just don't exist in our increasingly services-based economy.

A low strike rate in terms of higher educational attainment was not previously regarded as the affront to personal, social and economic expectations that it is now. Failure to read and progress to further learning was accepted as a function of social or cultural capital and personal disposition more than a reflection of the efficacy of the teaching and learning process.

Within that context, practices and theories emerged in the 1970s and 1980s that de-emphasised specific content knowledge and explicit teaching. In NSW, traditional grammar was discarded just long enough for us to lose the capacity to produce teachers with the requisite knowledge. In other states, the teaching of history in primary schools was abandoned wholesale. And, of course, the whole language approach to teaching reading took hold, relying as it does on social awareness and personal disposition. Dropping or not providing systematic instruction in grammar or direct and assured instruction in reading, for example, did not previously necessarily entail the economic or social or personal cost that it does now.

When I began working in policy some 25 years ago, it was not uncommon to hear bureaucrats of both the middling and senior kind say things like, 'the best way to encourage reading is to put a child in a room with books.' At one stage in the Department of Education, it was anathema to use the term 'teaching and learning'; the required terminology was 'learning and teaching,' indicating the centrality of the learner as a person rather than the imperative and responsibility of teaching. This reflected a profound faith in progressive dogma counter to ideas of specificity, instruction, causality between teaching strategy and learning, and I believe, professional responsibility and accountability.

When the demand for high attainment in education was relatively low or narrow, an affluent community such as Australia could afford to allow for the generalised educational practices of the time to complement the cultural capital of individuals who would go on to white collar work.

Times have changed. Teaching is now understood as the key variable for determining schooling outcomes. Student social background is understood as a factor. Personal student capacity is understood as a variable but not one that aligns with a student's background, and therefore, not an excuse for patterns of low achievement. This therefore has implications that go to the nature of teaching. An assurance of high expectations for all and universal or near universal attainment of reading and literacy as a foundation for further learning demands specific teaching practices.

Teachers of reading need to be explicit and systemised in their approach. They cannot assume student knowledge or rely on implication or individual student awareness. They cannot rely on simple exposure of students to texts, hoping to build excitement and motivation, depending on the force of each student's personality and their home culture to provide impetus to success.

So we have established the contextual imperative for effective policy. How has policy responded?

There has been no shortage of policy initiatives for improving literacy over the years, including:

- 1997–2003 NSW State Literacy Strategy Evaluation
- 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy
- 2006–08 NSW State Literacy Plan (\$154 million over four years)

- 2007 NSW Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan
- 2008 Auditor-General's report—Improving Literacy and Numeracy in NSW Public Schools
- 2011 Ministerial Advisory Group on Literacy and Numeracy
- 2012 Auditor General's report—Improving Aboriginal Literacy in NSW Public Schools
- 2013 DEC Literacy K–12 Policy.

And I have witnessed positive change in policy since the early 1990s, though it has been incremental. 'Why Jaydon Can't Read' notes the inclusion of reading strategies in curriculum and the occasional lurching forward in the production or pronouncement of materials that present direct, informed reading strategies.

In addition, the NSW government's response to the lack of an empirical underpinning to literacy policy is unambiguous and positive. Among a range of initiatives, perhaps the most strategic is the commissioning of research on how literacy interventions are informed by the research and how they are evaluated. A committee of the leaders of each school sector and educational agencies has been asked to develop advice on the use of evidence in determining interventions.

Nonetheless, there should continue to be profound concern about the specific expertise and the general capacity of teachers as a whole to respond to the literacy challenge.

Among teachers generally, the basic building blocks of a professional, empirically informed, scientifically structured approach to teaching reading is lacking. Specifically:

- There is no widespread knowledge and understanding of specific instructional strategies, their uses and effects for teaching reading, and other dimensions of literacy.
- There is no general capacity or confidence within the profession in evaluating professional practice, individually or as groups of professionals.
- When students are assisted through particular interventions to improve reading, teachers generally lack strategies to assist students to integrate acquired reading skills into their generalised educational and reading experience.

So if I'm right or even partly right about the gaps between research, policy and practice, what are the underlying conditions that result in this circumstance?

One dimension is the ideological contestation that characterises so much of education, and literacy is one of the favoured fields of battle. The result of the reading and literacy wars has been a lack of professional coherence among teachers, and a lack of real confidence that there are common and agreed truths and best practices that can and should be applied in appropriate circumstances.

Let's take the term 'literacy,' for example. The common sense understanding of literacy as a capacity to make meaning of written words, write and communicate that we would all recognise has been undermined in a couple of ways. The postmodern understanding of literacy—that meaning is always contingent, and about interpretation, and that there is no actual shared meaning—does not help create a common reference point for improving policy and practice.

There is also the appropriation of the word 'literacy' to add credibility and urgency to a range of other educational domains. So we now have scientific literacy and computer literacy and, of course, visual literacy. I can't help but feel that we are on the verge of 'numeracy literacy.' The effect of this is not only to obfuscate and undermine common understanding of the word, and therefore, the potential for being constructive around the idea of literacy, but also to challenge the primacy and fundamental urgency of learning to read and being literate.

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Empirical research is often characterised as inherently conservative and protective of privilege by teacher educators at universities.

This situation is exacerbated by political attacks on teaching as a whole. Many of these attacks are opportunistic and ill informed. This creates defensiveness among teachers that limits open discussion and, without prejudice, the pursuit of truth or better practice. It makes the professional discourse polemical rather than specific or scientific. It becomes about perceptions rather than evidence of effective practice.

A key concern is the lack of confidence generally among teachers in quantifiable evaluation, and a lack of expertise in, or regard for, measuring learning attainment. Generally, with a smattering of exceptions, teachers and teacher educators—the academics who train or prepare teachers—are not as confident in quantifiable or empirical research as they are in case studies or commentary.

This has a political dimension in that measuring learning attainment is often regarded as treating education as a product or good, which is motivated by a desire to marketise schooling. Empirical research is often characterised as inherently conservative and protective of privilege by teacher educators at universities. There is, ironically, often a stunning disregard for the fact that literacy attainment, for example, is distributed unevenly, and that measurably less literacy is attained by those most in need.

It is also the case that those who go into teaching overwhelmingly have strength in the humanities rather than maths and science. This is particularly true of primary and early primary years teachers. Once at university, there is a lack of expertise among teacher educators in empirical evaluation. So the combination of a lack of specific expertise and techniques, with a lack of empiricism, promotes an anti-science or anti-evidence culture.

When evidence does emerge, as in the work at Macquarie University on literacy addressed in ‘Why Jaydon Can’t Read,’ it gains little currency. There are few professional pathways or channels, common or connected abutments of practice to spread knowledge and practice.

What might some policy remedies be? I recently co-authored advice to the NSW government that has many of these concerns at its heart. These concerns are reflected in Minister Piccoli’s policy blueprint, *Great Teaching, Inspired Learning*.¹⁷

And how might policy respond now? Here are four easy ways:

1. Teachers should be required to have postgraduate qualifications with a research component.

Research undertaken by the NSW Institute of Teachers shows that teachers who have conducted postgraduate research are generally comfortable analysing student learning data and adjusting teaching strategies accordingly. As the majority of teachers are not comfortable determining the validity or reliability of student learning data, they are unlikely to engage with evidence of effective literacy learning and evaluation of practice.

It is a common declaration among educators that the point of literacy assessment is to diagnose student needs. That’s one point, but assessment is also important for reporting and accountability reasons. To the extent that it is intended to be diagnostic, teachers need to understand and feel comfortable with analysing student outcomes and what the data tell them, not only about individual students but also about their teaching. While there is rightly some concern about the limited diagnostic usefulness of assessments such as NAPLAN, teachers themselves are not comfortable developing strategies that diagnose and then address the specific and detailed needs of students.

2. A high-level achievement in English should be a prerequisite for entry into teacher education.

This is not because success in HSC English is a particularly good indicator of being able to teach literacy, though it is unlikely to count against you. Rather, it is because the most reliable indicator of likely success at university is your English mark. This is partly because everyone does a level of English in the HSC or in their exit credential, and all the levels are marked on a common scale. English marks are, in this way, a reasonable measure of an individual's ability. And teaching requires capable, intelligent and resilient individuals.

That is the issue: Teaching reading and literacy is, in fact, a technical and difficult task. Adjusting instruction to meet individual student variations, while maintaining the integrity of the instruction, is even more difficult. Translating progress in reading and writing into integrated academic competence and confidence is yet more demanding and nuanced, even if the original reading strategies are direct. We need minimum standards to ensure high-level entrants into teaching courses. English capacity is a broad but available measure.

3. All student teachers should be assessed on their knowledge of evidence of what works in reading and writing.

The curriculum in university courses should include this content as well as training in its application. It should have a theoretical and practical dimension. All student teachers should be assessed on their literacy (and numeracy) skills before graduation. They should be assessed on their capacity to teach literacy and reading, with particular regard for the literacy demands of their subject area if they are high school teachers.

This would constitute a fair proportion of the curriculum undertaken by early years and primary student teachers in particular. The assessment should include evaluating the teacher's actual practice with students during practicums or internships.

4. Professional standards describing the characteristics of effective professional practice in teaching literacy should be published, and used to evaluate teacher practice and promote improved practice.

There have been professional standards describing effective practice in NSW since 2004 and national standards since 2012. The standards are generic, however. They are useful for their purpose but with regard to literacy, they can be counterproductive because, being generic, they underestimate the importance of specific technical knowledge. The specific skills and the practices of direct literacy instruction need to be described and pronounced if they are to be prioritised as effective practice.

These are regulatory or quasi-regulatory expressions of what is required. They in fact highlight the limits of a regulatory approach to generating professional improvement and cultural change. The underlying, or intrinsic, change required is an unambiguous recognition by the teaching profession of the importance of specific and technical knowledge, and of scientific process to achieving literacy for the many, not just the few.

With regard to reading, the teaching profession needs to evolve to place the responsibility of direct instruction and its contingent relationship to learning at its heart. That is not to say that all teaching is direct delivery of rules and facts.

The underlying, or intrinsic, change required is an unambiguous recognition by the teaching profession of the importance of specific and technical knowledge, and of scientific process to achieving literacy for the many, not just the few.

Too much academic commentary on teaching practice is generic and relies on generalised and ideologically imbued principles.

But at the heart of modern teaching is the responsibility of teachers to provide all requisite knowledge and understanding in clear and explicit terms.

Such technical, accountable and empirically and scientifically supported practice is the product of a greater depth of knowledge and expertise, beginning with universities but in the end defended in standards of practice and ethics by all teachers.

I have worked with teachers, teacher professional bodies, and teacher unions for decades. The inability to match contemporary community demands for universal or near universal literacy is not down to reluctance by teachers generally. It is not, as is frequently asserted, a recalcitrant and industrially bound workforce that sets limits on an evidence-based dynamic in teaching practice.

When teachers are attacked, teacher spokespersons can be found to defend them. But why is it that teachers feel they can defend practice that doesn't accord with evidence? The lack of specific knowledge and practice reflects a lack of academic leadership, with key exceptions. Too much academic commentary on teaching practice is generic and relies on generalised and ideologically imbued principles. It is often expressed in terms of teaching as democratic process rather than in specific skills and knowledge. This accords with a progressivist ideological settlement within the profession.

In any profession, academic training and research is the bedrock for building sturdy practice, and a reference point for evaluation. From among academic leaders, iconoclasts should emerge with evidence and data that force practitioners to reconsider. I may be idealistic but the contestation should be on the veracity of the evidence. Without a strong and widespread culture of shaping practice to address the evidence, change is unlikely and teachers will not engage.

But bureaucrats such as myself can't be let off the hook. The lack of policy redress also reflects historical policy nonchalance. Too often, bureaucrats have found a safe place at the side of the reading wars and watched with detached curiosity. The safest possible path to take in this highly contested terrain is the so-called moderate balanced path. The trouble with the moderate balanced path is that it does not take you towards what works for which students and in what circumstances.

In education, the senior bureaucrats are also the most powerful professional leaders. Individuals in senior positions claim professional depth as well as administrative expertise and make judgments about what programs to support. If departments and agencies don't actively promote empirical research without fear or favour, and academics don't, why are we surprised when teachers and their spokespersons defend the orthodox?

Along with the sort of policy prescriptions I outlined earlier, and which are being implemented in NSW, some key understandings and counter orthodoxies should be declared and propagated. The days of generic constructivist homilies masquerading as teaching techniques for reading are over. The evidence is well and truly in. I'm confident teachers will be receptive.

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